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T-SHIRT GUIDE

FREE MOVIE TICKETS ON PAGE 29

JOE SATRIANI

SIX-STRING SURFER FROM CARLE PLACE

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THE RAVE-UPS
DIRTY LOOKS
GILBERT GOTTFRIED

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MICHAEL PENN
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JOE SATRIANI

Satch-mo': Six-String Silver Surfer From Carle Place

A recording artist who strives never to let technical prowess obscure emotional content or melodic intention, Joe Satriani makes the kind of albums guitar-minded youths live for. A random five minute sampling of *Flying In A Blue Dream*, his latest Relativity release, can either be an avalanche of tuneful two-handed tapping, screaming whammy bar dives and hammered trills, or a compendium of spacious and somber melodies. He's equally adept at coaxing either collection of tones out of his self-designed Ibanez guitar. Get out your spray paint cans, the second coming of the guitar-god comes baring the nickname 'Satch.'

Like his past releases (two Relativity LPs, *Not Of This Earth* and *Surfing With The Alien*, and one out-of-print independent EP, *Dreaming #11*), *Flying In A Blue Dream* is chock full of straight ahead hard rock, tributes to the comic book super hero the Silver Surfer, expressions of horror, pain, joy, and the downright wacky. Satriani entitled one tune "The Mystical Potato Head Groove Thing." The major departure he makes on *Blue Dream* is the inclusion of vocals on three of the album's eighteen tracks.

While many would set the epicenter of Satriani's career at the precise moment they first heard of him, likely following the release of *Surfing With The Alien* (the album which brought him to the attention of the wider rock audience and prompted Mick Jagger to hand pick him to join the prodigal Stone's solo tour of Australia and Japan), the Satriani story really began in Carle Place, Long Island, where he began jamming with school friends at 14. By fifteen he was giving guitar lessons to a handful of pupils, one of whom was Steve Vai, then a classmate of his at Carle Place High School (from which Satriani graduated in 1975) and now lead guitarist in Whitesnake.

Although he'd come under many influences while learning to play, including Eric Clapton, Jeff Beck, and The Who, Satriani candidly admits that no influence affected him as profoundly as William Westcott, the high school music teacher who taught him music theory.

After graduating, and a brief stint at a local college, Satriani moved out of town, way out of town, choosing to live for a time in Kyoto, Japan and eventually settling in Berkeley, California, where he formed a pop band called The Squares in 1979. Remembered as a cross between the Everly Brothers and Van Halen, the band failed to catch on, and his career as a solo performer began.

Financing the recording of *Not Of This Earth*, his Relativity debut, himself, Satriani replenished his bank account by accepting a smattering of session gigs, one being to do background vocals on the first Crowded House album, another to play guitar on Greg Kihn's *Love of Rock and Roll* LP. Those tasks and a series of live performances with Kihn done, the guitarist, by then in his mid-twenties, finally hit the road on his own. 1987's *Surfing With The Alien*—its title and album artwork Satriani's most blatant tribute to the Silver Surfer, proved to be his breakthrough. Arguably still his greatest LP to date, it was also his first to be awarded gold record status.

Currently on tour with long-time roadmates bassist Stuart Hamm and drummer Jonathan Mover, Satriani has plenty of time to contemplate his next move, whether it's material for the next LP, deciding whether he'll produce another artist first, or do that long anticipated project with former student Vai. Always the kind of artist who begins planning the next project before the first pressings of the last album come back from the factory, it's rest he generally doesn't allow himself. The tour will encompass the next eight months.

How aware were you of the live local music scene when you first started playing guitar?

Gee, when I started, not too much. My musical circle really revolved around Carle Place High School and then slowly evolved to include some other schools where we had girlfriends or stuff like that. But I really didn't get aware of the club scene, even when I started doing clubs, because we would only do these funny little places, like, out in Amagansett or other strange places that would have us. We weren't aware of the bands that were doing the sort of regular club circuit.

Did any local players figure in your development as a guitarist?

No, not at all, except for maybe John Riccio. He was the lead guitarist in the first band I joined. He was, I think, a year ahead of me at Carle Place High School, and by the time he left high school he had given up playing music professionally and I picked up some things from him.

But I understand that by far the biggest influence on you during that time was Bill Westcott, a teacher at Carle Place,...

Well, Mr. Westcott was giving music theory classes, and at the time most of his students would take one year of theory and then move on to something else or just give up taking music classes. Just about my year, there were a few of us who really wanted to go further with music. Tom Cipolla, who I believe teaches at CW Post now, and was a more classically oriented musician was in my class, and he wanted some advanced theory classes, so after our first year, which for me was eleventh grade, he gave us advanced theory classes—a class that he had to sort of invent because it really didn't exist as part of the curriculum there. Besides teaching us how to read and write in all sorts of forms for lots of different instruments, he was teaching us how to compose symphonies and string quartets, and...you can just about name it from music concrete to Baroque. He was giving us a fantastic training in all these forms and he really was the one who got me to understand music theory and eventually I was able to take it and turn it into my own guitar language.

Is this when the theory of pitch axis became a part of your arsenal?

That was something Bill Westcott passed on to me, it was his way of teaching the scales and modes to show you that everything depended on what your main pitch was, what your audience, so to speak, perceives as your main pitch, and then from there it was really just using the scales, starting on different degrees. For guitar music, popular rock and roll, that was really a fantastic theory because really that's what rock is all about; you generally focus around a few chords and one or more root centers and the way that you get a lot of variety on the music is to play different scales on top of that one root, whereas if you're playing jazz, generally you switch keys a lot more so you're getting your variety of notes from that. It really went right along with what I was hearing in my head being sort of a child of rock and roll. A great theory.

Do you remember the names of any of the local clubs or bars you played in?

Maybe...Hammerheads, there's a place called The New Grotto of The Purple Grape out in Amagansett, where we had a weekend engagement. There was a place called Ryan's, and, right across the street, a place I think was called Good Times. I think we played there once in a while. The band that I did the most amount of playing with was a band called Tarsis and the lead singer was Danny Calvagna.

About how old were you when you started teaching?

I guess I was around fifteen and I'd been playing for just about a year and some local kids, one of whom turned out to be Steve Vai, asked me if I'd give them guitar lessons and I just started teaching from there.

Do you think there's anything in particular about the style certain people play that would identify you as their teacher?

I really don't think so. I think what a student comes away with is really largely up to the student; it really depends on their desire and their discipline. I mean, I've taught the same stuff I taught to Steve Vai to a thousand other kids, but only one of them turned out to be Steve Vai, so...

When you're just playing away, how aware are you of the fact that you're changing mode, going from say a G Mixolodian to G Dorian. Is that something you're immediately conscious of, or something you discover later as you reflect over what you play?

Well, this is something a lot of people ask and it's a semi-loaded question right, because people are always trying to pit intellectual approach against feeling approach, and of course, once you're the kind of person who has digested all the notes and all the theories and all the intellectual approaches, they become sort of null-and-void and almost pointless, but it's impossible to describe that to someone. It's like telling somebody that when I speak French, I think in French and when I speak in English, I think in English, and then, of course, that becomes a very difficult concept for someone who is studying language for the first time. But let me say that there was a time when I didn't know what the hell was going on in music and I was taught from the ground up, so that now if I'm playing in G Dorian or G Phrigian and switching back and forth, I instantly know, but it's not the way you know something when you're a student. It's a realization that has absolutely no fanfare. There are no mechanics going on, it's so quick that you don't even really think about it, you simply know it. The main thing is, what is it you're trying to play? What's the feeling behind what you're doing? It's not an intellectual thing anymore. I think all musicians use their brain to eventually get out of the nuts and bolts thinking process that everyone has when they're a student.

A large percentage of the coverage you get comes in the musician's press, in publications such as Guitar For The Practicing Musician *and* Guitar World, *rather than in the general music interest press like* Rolling Stone. *To what degree do you think that's fixed the public's perception of you as a rock guitarist as opposed to your being a "rock personality"?*

I really don't know. I tend to think that the publications have projected more of an image, and since the average person out there does not have a magazine to publish about their feelings, you don't get that sort of vibe from them. But I meet people at my concerts all around the world and they're not just perceiving me as a one dimensional figure. I usually tend to think, like with most artists, it takes a while for the big magazines to understand what the people are really thinking, and the magazines that are more dedicated towards the actual event going on. I've been interviewed in depth, [since] back in 1987. People asked me about how I grew up, about what kind of cake I like to eat...and all that kind of stuff, so they've been getting profiles of me for a long time, but of course, you're not going to see an article on me in *People Magazine* and quite frankly, I don't want one. So I suppose if people don't see me that way then that's okay with me.

Was there a specific point in your development as a guitarist when you came to appreciate your own talents as a guitarist?

Well, I think that playing has always been a struggle for me and I'm always trying to push myself to get a lot better. I focus on the things I can't do when I'm in sort of a practicing state of mind. I always try to work on the anatomy that I've got to work with and try to develop the concepts that I come up with or have been taught, y'know, to develop them more fully. Certainly I've never thought that I was a really good player. I just sit back and coast.

Were you the kid in high school who was always carrying the guitar around?

No, I didn't always carry it around, but I did practice quite a bit. I did it as much as I could. The days that I was up to practicing three hours a day it felt like the

by Danny McCue

most I could ever handle and then I moved up to five hours a day. After I got out of school I started to work on doing up to eight and then eventually about 12 to 13. But I don't think I've ever practiced more than that amount; 12 to 13 hours a day seems to be about my total physical and mental limit.

How does your singing on stage fit into the overall mix, do you find you're cutting into the showmanship aspect of what you do or giving up something on the playing side?

No, not at all, it's a big plus to the show, I think, to have some more variety to it. I'm singing notes that I would be playing, so to me, musically, I'm not really trading anything, I'm just sort of using a different instrument to convey the music. Each of the songs that we do have a large amount of music surrounding them, when we do "Big Bad Moon" it's got three guitar solos, a harmonica solo, so I'm not really trading anything or giving anything up. Plus I think that the biggest surprise for me was when we started doing these shows—we've been out for about a month now, two weeks in Australia and two and a half on the west coast—that when we start to sing "Big Bad Moon," "I Believe," and "Can't Slow Down," you can hear people singing in the audience. You can look out and people are singing right along with me, so I know that we've connected and the audience has appreciated the fact that we've taken the set and expanded it to include these things.

Was that a reaction you didn't expect?

Yeah, I didn't know how people were going to react. As usual I knew I was going to do it and I knew I was going to have to take the accolades along with the lumps, however they came, and I wasn't worried about that that's no big deal, cause you've got to do what you want to do. So I was pleasantly surprised when they joined me. There's a part in "Big Bad Moon" where we bring the volume way down and you can hear the whole audience singing along with it and that always makes you feel good.

Do you think if you had this experience, as a front man singing, that you might have approached things in your past, such as the Mick Jagger gig, differently?

No, because the music that I played from when I was fourteen up until about three years ago was all me playing guitar and singing in bands with other singers as well, so I've been singing and playing guitar in front of an audience much longer than I've been playing instrumentals, so I've had plenty of practice.

Generally speaking, the more successful a performer becomes, the bigger venues he has to play and the further he gets away from optimum sound conditions, how have you dealt with that?

We simply haven't booked ourselves in bigger places. We're playing theaters that hold a few thousand people and we've avoided, unless we were forced into it, playing places that hold eight or ten thousand. We've been doing multiple shows, two and three shows in theaters that hold 3,000 a piece. I think that's about the limit. Some places are unusually good, where you can fit 5,000 people and it sounds really good, but they're few and far between. There's never been a place built for rock and roll music, never in the history of the world, so there's all of us out here and we're all struggling and we always get thrashed because of the sound, but until someone builds something specifically for this kind of music, I think we're always going to be up against something.

With each album that comes out, does your criteria of what will see the light of day get higher?

Oh of course, I mean, I'm not one of those guys whose had twenty albums out so you're catching me quite early in my recording career, but certainly each record I've had to practice harder for, I've had to study the art of producing more, each time I've taken on a larger, deeper theme to work into my music, and that's taken more energy from me and more time to work out.

Are you any more or less inspired at this stage of your career than you were, say, when you first started making records?

I think I feel more. See, in the beginning, all musicians are bombarded with negative attitudes and not a whole lot of encouragement when it comes to professional work. A guitarist's first foray into the studio is usually met with a bunch of idiots who seem to want to tell you everything they know about recording guitar is the Bible and everything that the guitarist wants to try out is useless and pointless, so when I started making my first record the whole idea was that I was going to do it myself and I was going to take a friend of mine along and we were both going to do whatever we wanted regardless of what conventional wisdom said about recording guitar. Certainly I think that each time we go in we realize that we've been rewarded for taking chances. In a sense we really don't know what we're doing when we start out, but we don't let that stop us from experimenting and that's how we wind up coming up with new and interesting things. I've been lucky that in working with John Cuniberti I've found a real experienced engineer who is always my safety net and whenever I start to entertain ideas that are really improbable, he will try them because he's a good collaborator and he's really creative. He's a good little piece in the puzzle. His contribution as an engineer is really fantastic because he's the one who will really make the ideas work. When I start talking about turning guitar sounds into the sounds of insects or something like that he has to try and translate it to equipment and technic. We have a good time in the studio so I have to say that as each record comes by we're a little more excited, a little more psyched, about trying new things.

Ok, now what about these song titles, I mean, what is a "Mystical Potato-Head Groove Thing"?

Just a funny title to describe a feeling that is difficult to describe. There is no literal translation to that.

A great title though...

Thanks.

Where do titles like "The Bells of Lal" and "Back to Shalla-Bal" come from?

The Bells of Lal are bells that are used in North Africa and Arabia that are put around camels' necks as they do these long treks across the desert and it's supposed to mesmerize them so that they become less aware of their surroundings. My wife picked them up for me while I was out on tour and when I had gotten back from the tour I had written this sort of musical suite based on the horror of a whole generation starving in the Third World. It was written in segments and there was one last segment that I hadn't finished yet and when she showed me the bell and I was listening to the timbre of them and reading the story about them, it sort of helped me finish the whole piece which is "The Forgotten, Part 1&2" and "The Bells of Lal, Part 1&2."

And Shalla-Bal is the Queen of Zenla, which is the planet where the Silver Surfer comes from. So the song refers to Norman Rad, the Silver Surfer wanting to get back to his love, the Queen of Zenla.

Do you leave yourself a lot of lee-way to open up and play in the live set?

Believe me, we certainly have a lot of places where we can play what we want. The music is really open ended that way and the way that Stuart and Jonathan play, they have a way of putting the song across the right way, but at the same time leaving it open for interpretation. We have quite a few songs where the beginnings and endings are really up to our little signals that we give each other either through the music or maybe the bat of an eyelash here or there. But at the same time we don't want to spend too much time working on one or two or three songs when what we really have to do is try to get across 16 or 20 pieces of music. I don't want it to get too self-indulgent.

What does your family think of your success being that you're still kind of experiencing the freshness of your success?

Well, of course they're very happy. They've always been very supportive of what I was doing and probably deserve the credit for the success along with me. They gave me encouragement, emotional or financial support if I needed it to continue. I don't think I'd be anywhere if it wasn't for the love and attention of everyone in my family, my parents, my sisters, and my brother.

Just to wrap things up, let me ask you, Jeff Beck likes to tinker with cars, what are you into besides guitars?

I don't think I have a hobby like that. I've thought about that. There's a lot of things I like to do, I'm into books and movies, I like hanging around with my friends and stuff, but I don't have one sport or hobby that I concentrate on the way that Jeff Beck works on cars. I think I play music most of the time. ❐